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AUTHOR Wyatt-Brown, Anne
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ABSTRACT

Recent writing theorists have recommended the use of collaboration and workshop techniques in writing classrooms, and the clinical experience of Donald C. Winnicott lies at the heart of this current thinking about collaborative classrooms. Winnicott's observations of mothers and infants produced a respect for families and a skepticism about the role of the physician. Winnicott's confidence in the patient and his detached observation with minimal interference had an important influence on James Britton. Britton was especially receptive to these new ideas because he valued the importance of fantasy in children's lives. Britton and his colleagues subsequently attempted to stimulate classroom research on how children actually learn to write, developing new methods and innovations. Britton believed in the inherent creativity of children and felt that traditional teaching inhibited student creativity. Thanks to Britton's influence, a whole generation of research-scholars have adapted Winnicott's techniques for the composition classroom. Lucy Calkins' work provides a remarkable example of Winnicott's techniques at work, although she never mentions either Winnicott or Britton. The connections between Calkins and Winnicott, though indirect, suggest a growing consensus among researchers. Even advanced writing programs can benefit from the techniques initiated by Winnicott. In short, numerous researchers have benefitted from Winnicott's influence and techniques, and his continued influence can only improve the current writing classroom environment. (Twenty-nine references are attached.) (HB)

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Anne Wyatt-Brown

# From the Clinic to the Classroom: D.W. Winnicott, James Britton, and the Revolution in Writing Theory[1]

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Some writing theorists, such as Peter Elbow (1973), have recommended the use of collaborative and workshop techniques in writing classrooms. As a result, many of us have shifted from a teacher-centered to a student-centered classroom. More recently, Johnson & Roen (1989) have extended Elbow's recommendation to the English as a Second Language classroom. At the same time Johnson & Roen have encouraged the use of a broad interdisciplinary base for the study of writing. They claim that the fields that have already contributed to this enterprise include linguistics, psychology, sociolinguistics, social psychology, anthropology, sociology and educational theory, theories of cognitive development, child language acquisition, and discourse or text analysis (Johnson and Roen, 1989). Yet, at least one discipline of crucial importance to writing has been omitted, namely, psychoanalysis. I am going to argue that the clinical experience of Donald W. Winnicott, the British object-relations theorist, lies at the heart of our current thinking about collaborative classrooms. I suggest that by reexamining what Winnicott learned

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[1] I am much indebted to Dixie Goswami of Clemson University and The Bread Loaf School of English, who read an early version of this paper, offered useful suggestions, and at my request sent a copy of it to James Britton. James Britton himself has kindly commented upon a longer version of this paper, sent me a copy of a recent essay (1977) in which he cites Winnicott, and given me permission to quote from his letters.



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from a lifetime of working with children and parents, we will better understand the basic ideas that motivate the concept of collaboration.

Winnicott's early papers show respect for children and their families, as well as considerable skepticism about the role that physicians play in healing their young patients, attitudes which can easily be transferred to teaching. Direct observation of mothers and babies, combined with careful history taking, taught him that many mothers provided their infants an emotionally healthy environment, if they were given the support necessary to "find their feelings," what he called "support-without-interference" (Winnicott, 1948, p. 162). As a result, he learned how much it meant to mothers to be able to meet their infant's needs, to become the "ordinary good mother" who provides "a good-enough environment for her child (Winnicott, 1949). This idea parallels the notion that even ordinary students can develop their creativity through writing.

External circumstances in the psychiatric community affected the evolution of Winnicott's thinking. For example, the shortage of trained analysts in the 1930s and 1940s forced him to allow families to keep seriously ill children at home. Reasonably successful outcomes convinced Winnicott that some families could cooperate with social workers and school authorities to provide the necessary holding environment (Winnicott, 1953, 1955). This success led Winnicott to notice that how doctors at a clinic treat parents "will determine whether they [parents] will calmly

return to taking responsibility which they can well take, or anxiously hand over responsibility to the doctor or clinic." In his judgment, it is best for parents to stay in charge especially when analysis is not possible (Winnicott, 1942, p. 71). [2]

Moreover, Winnicott deplored the ignorance that many physicians showed about the way feelings can affect symptom production. In his clinical practice he saw many children who had been consigned to bed for supposed chorea, a treatment which exacerbated their nervousness. The misdiagnoses, he determined, came from the doctors' disregard of the children's psychology. Therefore he urged pediatricians to resist medical interventions and to develop a wait and see approach with their patients (Winnicott, 1931a & b). He also argued that there are times when psychological illness can be a normal, if painful, part of human development. For example, when the birth of a sibling causes acute jealousy and ensuing symptoms, he urged the pediatrician to act as a friendly observer, "a sympathetic witness of the child's distress" (Phillips, 1988, p. 52). In Winnicott's opinion, we all must learn to experience frustration and "surely, a most

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[2] Of course, Winnicott respected the therapeutic usefulness of psychoanalysis. He himself was analyzed by both James Strachey and Joan Rivière, and his wife by Melanie Klein (Phillips, 1988). Once he declared "I believe there is no therapy that is in any way comparable with analysis," but found that all too seldom is analysis "both applicable and available" (Winnicott, 1942, p. 81, 83). When analysis had to be ruled out for some practical reason, he advised not even mentioning it to families as an option. On one occasion when confronted with a hypochondriacal mother, he discouraged any further therapy. The child needed to be spared further intrusion since analysis was impractical (Winnicott, 1942, Case 13). No intervention was better than an inappropriate one.

important aim of education should be to enable the child to manage life unaided" (Winnicott, 1931, p. 4). In general, he found children to be more resourceful than many experts in his time seemed to think. According to Adam Phillips, his biographer, Winnicott "tends to look, not for what is remotely unconscious, the esoteric unknown, but for what there is in a person 'waiting for acknowledgement'" (1988, pp. 52-53).

Winnicott's confidence in his patients and his methods of detached observation with minimal interference (Phillips, 1988) has had an important influence on the thinking of James Britton, who in turn influenced a generation of Anglo-American researchers and educators. The question of influence is an extremely difficult matter to determine. Most imaginative thinkers are inspired by a variety of people, ideas, and circumstances, and Britton is no exception. World War II itself had an enduring effect on British society and its educational system. During the war the difficulty of relocating children who had been evacuated from London challenged the accepted principles of educators, physicians, and other professionals (Phillips 1988). At that time Britton's sister, Clare, worked with Winnicott to assist the evacuees and their caretakers, and in 1947 they described some of their innovative solutions in an article that Britton still has in his possession (personal communication, October 29, 1991). When the Labour government gained power in 1945, many called for reforms in the class-bound British educational system so that working class children would have a greater chance of success.

All these factors influenced Britton's thinking in the postwar period.[3]

Britton was especially receptive to these new ideas because from the beginning of his career, he had valued the importance of fantasy in children's lives, an aspect neglected by more traditional educators. Thus, Winnicott's confidence in children and their families reinforced Britton's own predispositions. Like his brother-in-law, Britton began his investigations by observing carefully the way how British children learned or failed to learn to write. In the autumn of 1946, Britton, together with Gurrey and Nancy Martin, founded the London Association for the Teaching of English (Personal communication, February 17, 1992).[4] Their intention was to stimulate classroom-based research so as to discover how children actually learn to "speak, write, read, and listen" (Macrorie 1987, 246). They developed new qualitative research methods, innovations which

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[3] Don Rutledge (1988) reports that Britton introduced other teachers and scholars to the writings of Vygotsky, Luria, Piaget, Kelly, Polanyi, Langer, Sapir, and Chomsky, "the theoretical giants on whom he draws to produce his rich synthesis" (228).

Burton A. Melnick (personal communication, December 1, 1991) reminded me of the ferment in education in postwar Britain.

Britton served as an officer in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, stationed first in the Middle East and then in Italy during the war. Hence he did not learn the details of his sister's wartime work with Winnicott until the postwar period (Personal communication, February 17, 1992).

[4] Britton reports that he and his colleagues had no knowledge of Winnicott's work when they founded LATE. He first met Winnicott on April 5, 1952 and subsequently Winnicott and his wife Clare assisted their organization on various occasions. Britton recalls using Winnicott's work in the academic year 1953-54, but has no record of the details (personal communication, February 17, 1992).

Britton with characteristic understatement calls "a quiet form of research" (1983, 13).

Subsequently Britton has visited many schools, read school essays, and wrote case histories. The most extended of these was of a child named Clare, his daughter (Britton, 1970). Much as Winnicott wrote up a case, Britton charted Clare's developing skills both as a writer and interpreter of her psychic experiences. In general, Britton, like Winnicott, treats children as a "collaborator rather than as an antagonist," and also employs methods that are "minimal and unobtrusive" (Phillips, 1988, pp. 52, 54). Rather than impose an academic model of writing on children--the equivalent of the medical or the psychoanalytic model---Britton argues that children had the capacity to learn to express themselves provided the teacher allowed them to develop their own style.

Britton gained some of his faith in the creativity of children from art educators like Sir Herbert Read, who "emphasized each child as artist in his or her characteristic and un-adult fashion." Observing fellow teachers at a College of Art taught Britton early in his career that English departments were inclined to treat literature as "something <u>that other people had done</u>" (quoted in Tirrell, et al, 1990, p. 175). English professors persisted in acting as if children had no innate creativity. In Britton's view, traditional teaching inhibits students from developing their distinctive style. He urged teachers, particularly at the elementary level, to refrain

initially from correcting all the errors. Moreover, they should allow their pupils to write about subjects of intrinsic importance to them (Britton et al., 1975; Martin, 1983).

Thanks in part to Britton's influence, a new generation of researcher-scholars in England, Canada, Australia, and the United States have borrowed Winnicott's techniques of friendly but detached observation in their work with children learning to write.[5] In America two prominent allies are Donald Graves (1983; Graves and Stuart 1985) and Lucy Calkins (1983, 1986; Calkins with Harwayne, 1991), both of whose studies of elementary classroom writing have reached a wide audience of teachers and educators of teachers. Like Britton, Graves and Calkins have also stressed the connection between early artistic development and creativity in writing.[6] All three have argued persuasively for giving children space and time to develop their individual voices and sense of urgency in writing. Each of them has also made effective use of the classroom-based research method first developed by Britton and his London research team shortly after World War II and as a result have been part of an effort to dramatically alter traditional attitudes toward pedagogy.

Lessons from a Child (1983), Lucy Calkins' account of her

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[5] Excellent collections of essays by practitioners who have been influenced by Britton include Goswami and Stillman (1987) and Lightfoot and Martin (1988).

[6] Graves describes the writing process as often beginning with drawing; the teacher's job is to respond "to the specifics" of what children have written, to "let them know their scribbles come through" (1983, 18).

two years as a participant observer in a New Hampshire classroom, suggests how intertwined the achievements of all these important researchers have been. Her primary focus is on the development of a third grader named Susie, who, like Britton's daughter, became a confident writer over the course of two years almost without any direct help from her teachers, or for that matter from the researcher.

Calkins' study provides a remarkable example of Winnicott's techniques at work, although she is apparently unaware of her indirect connection to the psychoanalyst. She never mentions Britton either, preferring to give credit to Graves and to other researchers with whom she has worked directly. Yet Calkins is conscious of her debt to several other clinicians. For example, she acknowledges that Piaget's description of the process of internalization that children go through in middle childhood helped her understand Susie's mental growth over the two years of observation (Calkins, 1983, 62). She also feels that she benefited from Vygotsky's notion that the teacher should collaborate with students until they are able to work on their own (1983, 60). Furthermore, she applies Jerome Bruner's concept of scaffolding both to her observations of Susie and to her own writing.[7] Finally, Calkins follows Piaget's lead in being

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[7] For example, Calkins noticed that when faced with a difficult task, Susie found ways of creating "a concrete scaffolding," a system of organization that simplified her task (1983, 63). In a similar way Calkins, like a good teacher in the classroom, explains her terminology, introduces key words somewhat slowly, and searches for analogies that will clarify meaning.

unwilling artificially to hasten a child's progress. According to Bruner, Piaget categorized all inquiries about how one might speed up mental development as "la question americaine" (Bruner 1986, 141). Like Piaget, Calkins developed the patience to allow Susie to learn on her own.

Although Winnicott goes unmentioned by Calkins, his ideas about infancy can be fruitfully connected in various ways to the clinical findings she admires. Once again the observations of several theorists reinforce each other's findings. Winnicott asserts that an individual learns to be alone, "as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother" (1958, 30). Under benign circumstances children use such moments for imaginative play, which leads to a discovery of their inner lives and sense of authentic self. If all goes well, children learn to respect their play and their thoughts.[8] Young children develop elaborate monologues, which Piaget (1974) suggests allow them to express themselves but show no sign of wishing to affect the behavior of those around them, largely because they assume that listeners already understand. Indeed they fear that adults can even read their minds (116). Vygotsky's (1986) clinical studies, however, demonstrate that this egocentric speech becomes internalized later in life and remains part of our repertoire for solving

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[8] Britton (1971) extended Winnicott's finding by collecting rich linguistic data during moments when his daughter "Clare" was playing alone in his presence (88-89), thus enriching Winnicott's description of the child developing a sense of "his own personal life" from being alone "in the presence of someone" (Winnicott 1958, 34).

problems (30-31). This explains why Calkins observed Susie talking out loud as she selected words for her essay and created other forms of "concrete scaffolding" to help her complete the job (1983, 63).

Furthermore, Winnicott's insights about creativity and learning also suggest that Susie's classroom situation was more psychologically complex than Calkins realized. Susie, like the students described by Robert Brooke (1987), developed some sort of transference relationship with her teachers and with the researcher herself. Brooke analyzes the process in Lacanian terms, but the validity of his observations can be reinforced by Winnicott's clinical narratives. Brooke argues that "non-directive feedback helps facilitate the process of projection and response." When the teacher avoids stating her opinions, then the learner projects her own notion of what the teacher thinks and thereby discovers her own meaning (Brooke, 1987, p. 681).[9]

Winnicott's accounts of the varied ways he assisted families clarifies Calkins' role in the classroom even more. Her presence gave the teacher non-directive support. By refraining from telling the teacher how to revamp her classroom, Calkins allowed the teacher to make changes of her own (Calkins, 1983). Indeed Winnicott explicitly emphasized the need for discretion in making

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[9] In Susie's case, indirect, "nondirective" feedback, from classmates, teacher conferences, amplified by the gratifying attention of the researcher herself, contributed to the child's remarkable development. As Brooke points out, students learn from a "plurality" of responses (1987), from what Winnicott called the "the preliminary chaos" that precedes artistic creation (Milner, 1987).

interpretations. In some cases, he could interpret the unconscious (Winnicott, 1942, Cases 3, 7 & 9), in others the surface behavior. Occasionally he had to fight the instinct to "intrude myself" and "avoid giving understanding in relation to the repressed unconscious" (Winnicott, 1953, p. 114). Yet when he limited his interpretations, his patients could gain insight from "the application of knowledge gained by me in psycho-analytic work" (Winnicott, 1953, p. 108). According to Winnicott, Calkins provided the necessary support for the teacher to explore and change the holding environment that she offered the students. As a result, Susie took charge of her writing process. Calkins might have appeared to have been on the sidelines, but her knowledge provided a new resource for the teacher and the students.

For my part, I have found that even advanced writing programs at the university level can benefit from the techniques Winnicott initiated. For example, few students make oral presentations except when their writing is finished--after they have written a proposal or a dissertation. Students, however, can learn much from making a series of oral presentations of work in progress--ranging from the informal to the more elaborate. Early in the semester they introduce the audience to their key words, begin to define the problems they face, and learn to use speech as a way of planning, a rehearsal for writing. The informed questions from fellow students can illuminate procedural problems before the students have committed themselves to one

particular approach. They often discover for themselves how to solve problems or change direction without explicitly being advised to do so.

The teacher can point out what individual students have already accomplished. Often shy international students do not recognize their own strengths. Yet, many of them have had much experience creating visual aids. Getting a chance to exhibit their expertise can bolster morale, a necessary ingredient in the difficult task of improving one's writing. When individuals come to respect their own knowledge, they are more apt to persevere. As Winnicott remarked, "when a mother gradually pieces together an almost complete history of her child's emotional development, who but an analyst is likely to supply what she wants, which is the true recognition that all the pieces do weld together into a whole?" (Winnicott, 1942, p. 82). In the classroom, teachers and fellow students can provide the same recognition.

In sum, it becomes obvious that Lucy Calkins in the United States, and James Britton in England have benefitted from the example of a great clinician, albeit not one currently favored by writing theorists. Not only have they conducted their research along the lines modelled by Winnicott by playing the role of the friendly but unobtrusive observer, but they have shared his enthusiasm for the kinds of self-discoveries of their charges. Recognizing that the children need large blocks of time in which to make their experiment, they have encouraged a new generation of teacher-scholars to revolutionize the schedule, as well as the

goals of the elementary school classroom. As a result of their work, Winnicott's convictions about the nature of research and therapy are receiving a new testing ground. My hope is that by examining the principles of Winnicott's thinking and the circumstances necessary for an adequate professional "holding environment," we may be able to improve the odds that his attitudes will survive in the writing classroom.

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